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CHILD LABOR IN THE SOFT COAL MINES

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The committee's investigations of child labor in the soft coal region have extended over sections of Pennsylvania, Maryland and West Virginia. The field thus far studied does not justify us in attempting any estimate of the number of children employed. Child labor in the bituminous industry differs from that in the anthracite, as in the former there is no slate picking and the children employed are inside the mine. They work as runners, drivers, door boys and couplers, while perhaps the larger percentage are employed with their fathers in loading coal.

In one Pennsylvania mining borough where from 1,000 to 1,200 people are employed in the mines, it was estimated by several of the miners, two mine superintendents, the chief burgess and the superintendent of schools that between 175 and 200 boys under 16 were employed in the mines. The comment of the superintendent of schools is significant. He says: "Last year I received certificates signed by doctors certifying that children were unable to attend school on account of physical disability and we afterward found the children working in the mine. Of course, we got them back in school. Men take boys in the mine actually so small they can hardly carry their dinner bucket without dragging it, in order to claim an extra half turn, *i. e.*, more cars to fill. The cause of this is that there are too many workers in the mine so as to have more tenants for the company houses and more customers for the company stores. All are expected to trade at the company store." A borough policeman added that it was not difficult to get a small boy in the mines. He said: "I take my boy to the superintendent and tell him a hard luck story, and especially if I have a big family and trade at the company store, he will take him in. They do not ask for certificates of age in the mines here."

These expressions throw light on several causes of the employment of young children in the coal mines. These causes may be roughly classified as follows:

First. The Company Store and the Company House.—It is claimed by many miners and citizens in the coal region that where the mining companies maintain general stores and own a number of houses for rent, they customarily bring to the region a larger number of people than can be regularly employed. The result is that while the mine is operated every day, each miner will get from three to four days' work in a week, while the number of coal cars assigned each man in a day is limited. If a man finds it impossible to maintain his family under these conditions he is tempted to take his own boys into the mine and on their account is allowed fifty per cent more cars (called a half turn) than if working alone. Sometimes it is said these boys are too small to be of any real assistance, but their presence enables the father, by over-working, to earn a larger wage. This explanation seems justified in many localities, while in others the number of cars supplied to the workers is unlimited, and the management vigorously discourages child labor.

Second. Racial Traits.—We may illustrate this by one borough found in the central part of Pennsylvania, inhabited principally by Swedes and Italians in about equal numbers. Although in the lower grades of school the Swedish and the Italian children are about equally divided, in the third and fourth grades the Italian children begin rapidly to drop out and large numbers were found in the mines, while the Swedish children remain in school and go through the grammar grades, and several of them into the high school. It was a small borough and the schools were not graded up to the standard of other borough and city schools, but so far as the opportunities afforded, those Swedish fathers and mothers were keeping their children in school and out of the mines. Yet the houses occupied by the two races were very similar: their economic condition appeared much the same. The Swedes had perhaps lived in the community a little longer and therefore were a little more independent than the Italians, but the necessity for protecting these children of the Italians against the misguided ambition of their parents is evident. These people are ignorant of our English language, ignorant of the value of our American institutions, ignorant of the

handicap they are placing on their little ones by this premature employment. The necessity for the larger parent, the state, intervening to protect the children against their own parents is very well illustrated by the case of a little boy I discovered some weeks ago down in the mines in West Virginia. Two years ago, at the age of eleven, he came to school unable to understand a word of English. Through an older Italian girl who had learned the English language the superintendent said to the little fellow that he was glad to have him there and that the school desired to do all it could to help him. Goaded on by the sense of being placed in a class with little children six and seven years of age while he was eleven, he was spurred to his best endeavors, and through those two years he passed successfully through the first, the second, the third, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh grades of the school. But at the end of those two years, just a few months ago, his father, an industrious, hard-working, patient Italian, thought the boy's education was complete and took him out of school. He took him away, outside the borough limits and beyond the jurisdiction of the school, and down three hundred feet underground to load coal, a mile and a half from daylight! And little John, who would perhaps have been developed into one of our great artists or educators or statesmen had he been permitted to remain in school, now probably has educational opportunities closed to him forever.

In the anthracite field the same sacrifice of the so-called foreign child is found.

In one of the anthracite mining boroughs of Pennsylvania, with a school population of about 3,500, we found the people divided into two broad classes, Americans and foreigners. By "American" in that community was meant Americans, English, Scotch, Irish, Welsh and Germans, wherever they may have been born. By "foreigner" was meant Lithuanians, Greeks, Magyars, Italians, Poles—a large number of races lumped off together as foreigners, or "Slavs," "Huns," "Dagoes," or by some other term, according to the moral and intellectual standpoint of the person describing them. There were these two classes, Americans and foreigners. In the lower grades of school they compared very favorably. In the first two or three grades the foreign children—that is, the children of those called Slavs—slightly outnumbered the Amer-

ican children. As we came up through the first two or three grades, they began to drop out, and by the time they reached the fourth grade the ranks of the foreign children were sadly depleted, so that at the end of the grammar school they had nearly disappeared, and in the high school of ninety-nine pupils there were only eleven of these foreign children. But I found this curious circumstance through comparison of the American and foreign children, that while there were only eleven foreign children out of ninety-nine in the high school, the honors for scholarship in the first and second grades of the high school were held by young Lithuanians, while the valedictorian of class 1905 was a young Jewess born in Russia. If we are to serve these elements that are coming to us from all shores, if we are to give them the chance to partake of our civilization and become familiar with the principles of our government, then it becomes our duty as American citizens, not out of pity for these children, but out of consideration for our democratic institutions, to offer them, not the worst we have, but the best we have—access to all our public institutions and privileges.

Third. The Attitude of the Mine Management.—Sometimes in the same community the widest disparity is found between different mines. In one mining town in Central Pennsylvania we found two mines located on the same hillside. The thickness of the veins was about equal in the mines. The general conditions of mining, so far as could be discovered by one who does not understand the technical problems of mining or of mining conditions, were about equal. One of these mines is operated by a large concern closely identified with a great railroad corporation, and there I discovered not less than ten per cent, and possibly fifteen per cent, of all the employees were boys under sixteen years of age. The other mine was an independent concern, and so far as we could find not a boy under sixteen years of age was employed. One enemy of this mining company who was interviewed said he believed there were two or three boys not sixteen years of age, but was not quite sure. This we regarded as rather strong testimony in favor of that company from one not in sympathy with it. This does not reflect upon the organization of the mine itself, for in other places we found the reverse true. The large corporations were freer from child employment than some of the independent concerns. This instance is given only to show that in the same locality the difference seemed entirely

due to the attitude of the mining superintendents. The superintendent in the one where the children were employed said he went to work when he was only eight years old, and it was the best thing that ever happened to him. He thought if the boy had not enough education when he reached twelve years of age to get through life successfully, he was no good anyway, and the sooner he went to work the better. The other superintendent, who had formerly been a superintendent of schools, said he cherished for every boy in that community the largest educational opportunity. He said: "If I know it, no boy gets inside this mine or any other mine in this borough until he has had a fair opportunity to lay the foundation for an American education."

Fourth. Conditions of Labor.—A coal mining community in Maryland presents a striking contrast between mines located on opposite sides of the same mountain. In one, an independent concern, it was estimated by several of the employees, and was the judgment of the investigator who saw all the people going into the mines, that not less than forty per cent of those employed were under sixteen years of age; while in the other, a large railroad mining company, six or seven of whose mines were visited, no boys under sixteen could be found. We attempted to discover the reason for this disparity. There seemed to be no sentiment in the community that would have turned the boys toward one mine and away from the other, but on examination we found widely differing conditions of labor in the mines. In the first mine where the boys were employed the vein is from three and a half to four feet thick. Small mules are used for hauling in the mines, because the company does not care to excavate more earth than is necessary to get the coal out from the headings. For driving these mules boys are convenient, as also for tending doors and for loading cars. In the other mines the vein is a large one, running from eight and a half to nine feet in thickness. The work is very heavy. The cars are large, and the boys are not found profitable there. The differences were due entirely to natural conditions. This illustrates clearly the error of attempting to take one mining operation or one factory, or one sweat shop, or one institution of any kind in the study of this problem, and making a generalization that covers the whole field.

Fifth. Defective Laws.—In Pennsylvania, a boy cannot legally be employed in the anthracite mines until sixteen years of age. He

may be employed outside the mine in the breakers at fourteen. At twelve years of age he may be employed in a bituminous mine if accompanied by his father, though he may not go in the mine independently until he is sixteen years of age. Because of the defective law, making it impossible to prove the age of the child, boys two or three years younger than twelve years of age are employed in the bituminous mines. Many whose parents confessed that the boys were ten and eleven years of age were found employed in some of the soft coal mines of Pennsylvania.

In Maryland and West Virginia the school and child labor laws are little better, and where industrial conditions offer the temptation, the employment of children is extensive. The school opportunities in many of these districts are very meager. Sections rich in coal deposits and laden with the clouds of smoke from the coke oven, have no accessible school privileges above the primary grades, while probably not over five per cent of the children of many of these communities pass beyond the grammar grades. One mining village in West Virginia was found containing about fifty homes with no school whatever, the nearest school house being said by a neighboring school principal to be a mile and a half down the railroad—there is no public highway—and several citizens of the village expressed their doubt whether any of the children ever attended school there. The great educational awakening in West Virginia, however, gives promise that in the near future adequate school privileges will be provided for every child in the state. The same, I believe, may be said of the educational awakening in both the other states now under consideration. In Pennsylvania the activity of the school superintendents stationed in these mining sections is remarkable. Most of these teachers have the burden of this problem heavily upon their souls, and many are working beyond their strength to find some way to keep the child from being exploited, and to keep it in school.

An important aim of the National Child Labor Committee is to co-operate actively with the school superintendents, the factory inspectors and other officers of those states for the enactment of such laws as will lift the burden, will make it easy instead of hard to have the law enforced, will make it natural instead of unnatural to have the truth told.

We have been misunderstood frequently in speaking of the disposition on the part of many parents to deceive regarding the age of their children, and we were recently accused of charging widespread perfidy among the mining population of Pennsylvania. Of course, such a criticism is ridiculous. Consider one of these foreign parents who was never in school; knows nothing about reading or writing even in his own language. His child has been going to school for three or four years. The parent believes that now the child would be a valuable asset in the family income. Perhaps his labor is greatly needed. The parent believes he has already had sufficient opportunity to gain knowledge and that the best thing for the child is to put him to work.

Many times, in fact, these parents do not know the nature of the oath they take. I chanced in the office of a notary public some months ago in Pennsylvania, and there came a man, evidently a foreigner, with his boy, apparently about nine years of age. The man, in broken English, said he wanted "work paper" for the boy. The notary public was not in town that day. His brother, who was a traveling salesman for a local brewery, was in, and possibly desiring to receive the fee of twenty-five cents offered by the State of Pennsylvania for this valuable official service, he sat down at the table and asked the man his name and the name of the boy. Then he began to write. That was all the conversation that passed between them. After writing he stood up and read something which I did not understand and this foreigner could not understand, raised his hand and motioned to the man to do the same. Taking the paper—my errand not known at the time—I found that this little fellow was born on a certain day fourteen years and two weeks before, and therefore was two weeks over the legal age limit for employment. Such is the confusion that is spread throughout the community. The boy goes into the mine after being in this country about two months. The school authorities had not yet discovered him; it would have been impossible to do so. If a mine inspector discovers what his age is he also discovers an official document of the State of Pennsylvania saying that the child is fourteen years of age and is entitled to be employed. If he takes legal action to remove the boy from the mine he may be doing justice to a boy here and there, and he may do injustice to some other boy who is undersized but of the proper age.

Here, as in the anthracite region, the cost in life and limb forms a large percentage of our national expenditure for the production of coal. In this industry as in others employing young children, the children bear more than their share of the risk, except that the miners and their laborers engage in the extra hazardous department of the industry. Sam Madill is, unfortunately, not an exception in this region. Going into the mines when he was but thirteen years of age, he worked until two years ago, when he was run over by a car in the mine and his foot taken off. Then he came to school for two years, and is now employed as a clerk in a thriving mining village. We are told that many of the monks in the middle ages believed it necessary that the body should be mutilated in order for the soul to grow. Was there significance in this belief which led many of them to wound, expose, torture and cripple their bodies almost beyond recognition? Evidently the promoters of child labor in the coal fields think so, for in every large coal-producing community one meets on the street boys and men who bear evidence to the bodily cost of their employment.

On the theory of compensation, the children of the coal regions, deprived of school, in early years taken to work in the dark corridors of the mine, should have as the reverse side of their life picture a home of comfort and attractiveness. To many of them even this is denied. The coke-producing section of the soft coal fields presents a weird spectacle to the stranger. At night the string of coke ovens, perhaps half a mile in length, is strangely beautiful, as the night is lighted up by the winding line of flames, the dense cloud of smoke being brightly illuminated. By day the scene is desolation. No vegetation can grow in the shade of the coke oven smoke, and for many hundred feet on either side of the works appears no grass or flower or living tree, but grimy, unpainted houses, muddy streets and alleys and foul stench from the unsewered yards. Yet with all the wealth of our national life and the unmeasured hidden treasures of these coal regions, this is the type of surroundings we offer hundreds of little children through all the days of childhood—this is their only definition of home.

The National Child Labor Committee would urge upon the judgment and conscience of the American people the necessity of so amending the child labor and educational laws of the coal-pro-

ducing states as to render it impossible for any child under sixteen years of age to engage in any labor inside a coal mine. We also heartily endorse the recommendation of the chief mine inspector of Pennsylvania that certain forms of labor which expose to special danger should be limited to those of higher age; that runners should not be less than seventeen, loaders not less than eighteen, nor miners under twenty-one. But in the interest of safety, education and economic progress, we must protest against allowing a child of fourteen years of age inside a coal mine. The large percentage of accidents to mine workers under sixteen years of age and to non-English speaking workmen of all ages, is sufficient evidence of the necessity for such legislation as shall guarantee every boy who contemplates this dangerous employment both time and opportunity for the development of sound judgment, physical growth and a fair education.